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Catholic priest with a taste for 'self-bondage' returned to ministry

Tim Townsend St. Louis Post-Dispatch Religion News Service | Sep. 17, 2013

The Roman Catholic bishop of Springfield, Ill., has returned a priest to ministry after an internal investigation into what the priest's own clinical therapist had diagnosed as "non-sexual self-bondage."

Bishop Thomas Paprocki said in a statement that Fr. Thomas Donovan would be a chaplain to the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George and would move to the nuns' provincial house in Alton, Ill.

In November, Donovan called 911 from the rectory of St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Springfield, where he was pastor, and told dispatchers he had placed himself in handcuffs and needed police help to free himself.

When police arrived, they found the priest wearing an orange jumpsuit and "a leather bondage-type mask with a bar in his mouth," according to the police report.

When Donovan met with the bishop, the priest insisted he'd been alone "the whole time of this incident" and "denied that there was any sexual component to this," according to an earlier statement from Paprocki's office.

The following weekend, St. Aloysius parishioners learned that Paprocki had granted Donovan a leave of absence. In a message to his flock, Donovan said he had been "responding to the stresses of priestly ministry in a way that has come to compromise my own personal safety and welfare."

Paprocki then convened a "special panel" to look into the matter. Panel members reviewed "reports of mental health professionals summarizing treatment, diagnoses and recommendations for treatment for Father Donovan," according to Paprocki's statement.

Two members of the panel conducted a "lengthy and probing interview" with Donovan, according to the statement, and the panel as a whole conducted a "full personal interview" with him.

The panel concluded that "Father Donovan was alone at the time of the incident"; that there is "no information to suggest that Father Donovan is a danger to himself or others"; and that "gradual reintroduction to priestly ministry is appropriate."

[Tim Townsend writes for *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.]

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